Existentialist Feminism and Gendered Being: A Critical Study of the Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Shabnam Ashai and Forugh Farrokhzad

PhD Synopsis

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The complexity of human existence, existential crisis, human angst and suffering has been dealt extensively by the philosophy of existentialism which emerged in mid twentieth century. It rose to popularity particularly after the two world wars which had caused much disintegration and destruction "both in the material terms and psychological trauma suffered by people" (Rickenbach 3). Existentialism as a school of philosophical thought deeply engages with the idea of human existence. It attempts to study what it means to be human and gives an ontological account of what it means to exist. It centralizes the human subject and views this subject not merely as a thinking being but also as a feeling, acting and living being. It identifies the importance of a human individual's experiences in the journey of self-discovery. The existentialist thinkers like Kierkegaard, Sartre and Simon de Beauvoir reject the predetermined and given knowledge as absolute, and view life of a human individual as a wide series of personal experiences, perceptions, emotions, choices and actions. The theory of existentialism views humans as responsible agents, the only source of meaning in this ultimately meaningless and finite world. It values humans in themselves and does not treat them merely as things or instruments (Flynn 13). It philosophizes human existence and is "preoccupied with the subjects of human nature, freedom, religious belief, mortality, death and commitment . . . which are quintessentially existential themes" (Mahon 9). Also, the liberating and modern approach of existentialism is to see and know the world without any limitations or narrow prisms of ethics, morality, religion or any given standard judgements. It seeks to challenge and question the 'givens' and encourages human beings towards "an awareness of their existence in its essential freedom" (Molina 412). This means that the essence of human existence is believed to stem from the freedom to make choices. Existentialism as a philosophy emphasizes that it is the sum total of the choices which humans make that determine the quality and pattern of their lives. (Kierkegaard 19).

The two broader offshoots of the theory of Existentialism are theistic (represented by Soren Kierkegaard) and the atheistic (represented by Jean Paul Sartre). Theistic existentialism focuses on an individual's choice in relation to God whereas the atheistic existentialism is concerned with an individual's choice in a Godless universe. Both the philosophies of existentialism however, entirely focus their attention on man's being. It is worth considering whether the term 'man's experience' is inclusive of women's experiences as well. Whether or

not, everything that has been explored about man as a human individual is applicable for woman as an individual too. This is because, women throughout history have been defined by men and also differentiated from them in terms of the physical, mental and emotional parameters. The feminist existential philosopher, Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* uses the Hegelian term "other" to study the man-woman binary as self and other and explicates how woman's existence has been relegated as secondary to man. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is a revolutionary text as it brought together the insights of existentialism and combined it with the goals of feminism for which she is regarded as the founder of existential feminism. Her argument, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (149) has become central to the school of existentialist feminism. Beauvoir argues, 'to become a woman is to become the 'other'. This social construction of woman as the other, according to Beauvoir is a process of designating women as lesser beings who have been purposefully defined as the ideal human subjects, and therefore restricted in their pursuit of freedom. She, therefore questions, "how in the feminine condition, can a human being accomplish herself?" (37). Beauvoir further explores how women have been assigned various racial, ethnic, economic, sexual and gender identities, all of which contribute to the process of their othering. She highlights how women have been defined by men only in terms of their bodies or biological functioning which becomes their sole source of recognition and purpose of being in the world. She writes, "woman? very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary: she is a female- this word is sufficient to define her" (3). The language employed by men in defining women is purely biological and thus, the existence of women is reduced down to their body or merely to their reproductive performance of giving birth. Women, across history have mostly been labeled or glorified as 'fertility Goddesses' which has defined their entire existence akin to some kind of agricultural harvest.

Against this disparity, existentialist feminism as a philosophical school of thought allows for an adequate and in-depth examination of women's lived and felt experiences rather than the predetermined, abstract definitions of womanhood. It attempts to deconstruct the essentialization of what a woman is like or should be like according to men, and focuses on exploring women's being beyond their body or anatomical make up. It emphasizes that women, like men, must be able to lead what Sartre calls "authentic life" which can be achieved by making authentic choices in life. Women must be in a position to take charge of their lives rather than being confined within the 'givens' of society which they are born into. For instance, there are some inevitable forces surrounding an individual's life like being born with a certain

sex, color, class, caste, religion, region, all of which undeniably mold a human individual's personality yet one can always grow and change in the process of relearning, re-making and re-establishing oneself. On the contrary, any individual who denies itself the freedom of making the conscious authentic choices lives in what Sartre calls "bad faith" (47). One of the reasons of women becoming the victims of bad faith is because of the patriarchal conceptualization of the idea of womanhood. Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique* writes that women are victims "of false belief system that trains them to find identity and meaning in their lives through their husbands and children" (69). Women right from an early age are taught that they 'essentially' belong to home and that the outside world or the social, political and economic domains fundamentally belong to men. This makes women lose their sense of autonomy and agency and they remain unquestionably passive and subservient in the state of immanence in contrast to men who actively oscillate between immanence and transcendence. Existentialist feminism, therefore, debunks the essentialist beliefs and theorizations about women so that they enjoy the same transcendence and freedom of choice that men have continued to enjoy. It also sees women beyond and outside the static myth of what is called "archetypal or eternal feminine" which has been a yardstick of perfection against which women in patriarchal societies are judged and measured. It also deconstructs women as some kind of 'mystery' as constructed by men. It traces women's existence without primarily looking at her as a vessel of reproduction. Apart from this, feminist existentialism focuses that the sole aim of women is not just to ask for equality but to be able to choose, to approach life just as women will.

Women's existence and idea of 'being' can be best explored by the account of experiences from women themselves. This research, therefore, aims to study three women poets i.e., Sylvia Plath (American), Shabnam Ashai (Kashmiri), and Farogh Farokhzad (Iranian) who through their writings contemplate over the state of their existence and reflect their inner most states of varying emotions, experiences and thereby, offering a first-hand commentary on pain, angst, existential crisis, feeling of alienation and abandonment in women. The poetry of Plath, Ashai and Farrokhzad offer the unique ways of exploring existential feminism as it covers the voyage of their life which leads into the discovery of self and also the revelation of women's being. Their poetry reflects their existence and state of 'being'. Their existential poetry becomes an act of 'self-life writing' which covers a broad spectrum of women's issues like subjectivity, identity, power and vulnerability. Their poetry predominantly

deals with their inner most states of mind rather than their conformism with the external realities. Poetry, therefore becomes a direct expression of their self, subjective experiences and personal truths which challenge the objective and generalized truth about womanhood as constructed by men.

The use of 'I' in their poetry is unique as it becomes both the subject and the object of their narrative. 'I' in Plath's, Ashai's and Farokhzad's poetry is personal, subjective and individualistic. At the same time, through their unique patterns of writing, they shake the mainstream phallocentrism in literature by their unconventional poetic styles, themes, genres and structures of writing. The personal account of their life and experiences expressed in the form of poetry depicts the difference in the living patterns of men and women. These poets give a voice to those subjects or issues which men would normally not address. Their aspirations, longings, intimate desires, sorrows and articulations through silence sets their creative world on a different pedestal. With their most innate and subjective writings about their existence, they challenge the patriarchal limits and transcend the boundaries.

Sylvia Plath is a prominent figure in the world of modern American poetry. Her poetry has created a niche in the history of poetry as well as in the minds of countless readers. Plath's poetry is highly rich and dynamic in nature. Jacqueline Rose in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* discusses the diversity in Plath's poetry and comments, "to try to construct a single consistent image of Plath becomes meaningless because the multiplicity of representations that Plath offers of herself makes such an effort so futile" (149). Plath is a widely read poet not just for her rich literary writings but also due to her complex life, troubled psyche and suicidal attempts that is reflected in her poetry. Her poems scream of the breaking and cracking up of a woman's self. Her poetry collections *Ariel*, *The Colossus and Other* are exceptional and entice one into the most surreal landscape overshadowed by a sense of being and not being i.e., her poetry reflects a split in a woman's life caught between a will to live and a will to die. Her poetry provides a unique existential sight of 'dying in living'. As an existentialist, there is pain, despair and meaninglessness at the heart of her poetry. She offers the ideas of nothingness and death in the most subtle forms. It is this consciousness of nothingness in Plath's poetry that forms an essential nature of existentialism. McFarland writes, "as a poet, she had never strayed away from revealing personal, emotional, painful subject matter" (259). Plath's poetry is a combination of radical feminist and existential themes. Through her unique and individualistic

poetry, she refers to an ontology of being female which gets evident in her 'Bee poems' through which she questions, "how can we thrive in the hive"?

Shabnam Ashai is a contemporary Kashmiri poet who widely speaks about existentialism in her poetry. Her poetry offers a unique philosophical treatise of woman's existence. She reflects upon human being's alienation from self, from nature and from God while also depicting the dual state of physical and metaphysical anguish. Her own research on alienation is of great relevance, and her fair understanding and knowledge of existentialism gets reflected in her poetry. She is not a traditional poet as she does not choose to write poems with traditional meanings or conventional writing styles. She has several poetry collections credited to her name. Her first poetic anthology *Akeli* (Alone) won her a national award. The second anthology of Urdu poems *Mai Sochti Hoon* (I Think) came to be published with the assistance of Sulabh International Sahatiya Akademi, New Delhi. Her much enriched third collection of poetry titled as *Man Bani* (Melody of Mind), got published in bilingual versions, Urdu as well as Hindi, by the Urdu literary journal "Istera" which has so far emerged as her literary landmark. *Catharsis*, her most unique collection of poetry discusses various facets of women's existence. Ashai has created a niche in poetic world and intrigued readers with her existentialist thoughts. Her poetry abounds with the ideas of alienated self, identity crisis, quest for subjecthood and women's existential angst. She also changes or reverses the patterns of traditional dialogue between man and woman and renders it new with her keen existential introspection. She offers an unprejudiced woman's perspective on human relationships. Her poetry becomes a saga of 'woman's being' in its own exclusive and intricate sense. The poetry of Ashai has also been defined as a narrative full of questions and not merely a confrontation.

Forugh Farrokhzad is a modern Iranian poet who writes about life from a woman's point of view. She emerged as a strong feminine voice and asserted her identity through her poetry. Her poetry collections securely established her as a promising poet. Her poetry reveals that she consciously formed the essence and meaning according to her own free will. She is a revolutionary poet of the twentieth century Iran who is regarded as the precursor of New Wave in Iranian's poetry. In one of her interviews, she says, "it is natural that a woman, because of her physical, emotional, and spiritual inclinations, may give certain issues greater attention, issues that men may not normally address". In her poetry, she draws a keen attention towards women's intellectual abilities which sets her apart from conforming to the traditional binary divisions of men being intellectual and women being emotional. Her voice emerges as one of

enlightenment, audacity and dissent. *Words Without Borders*, an international Magazine discusses Farokhzad as follows:

> Her poetry was the poetry of protest - protest through revelation—revelation of the innermost world of women (a taboo subject until then), their intimate secrets and desires, their sorrows, longings, aspirations and at times even their articulation through silence. Her expressions of physical and emotional intimacy, much lacking in Persian women's poetry up to that point, placed her at the center of controversy, even among the intellectuals of the time. (37)

In her poetry, she boldly addresses men and their biased narratives in order to create a first-hand existential account of woman's being and existence. She pushes against the societal, cultural limits and literary boundaries purposefully designed to prevent women from exploring 'self'. Her poetry unveils her 'being' and she refuses to accept that being of a woman was supposed to be male dictated. In her short life span, she succeeded to journey from a status of a Poetess to a Poet.

The works of these three women poets seek to challenge the quintessential, normative male existentialism and offer a clearer insight into the world of women. Their poetry is painfully personal, subjective and true to their existence as women. The proposed study aims to critically analyze the poetry of these three female poets from the point of view of feminist existentialism. The study would also explore the differences and affinities in the experiences of these women poets having lived in different spaces across different cultures and different time periods. Despite their differences or contrasts, the poets shall be read under a common coherent shelter. In the same regard of differences and similarities, Elaine Showalter in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" opines,

> There are important differences between women as writers: class, race nationality, and history are literary determinants as significant as gender. Nonetheless, women's culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space. (190)

Objectives:

- To analyse the poetry of American poet Sylvia Plath, Kashmiri poet Shabnam Ashai and Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzad under the broader theoretical framework of existentialist feminism. The proposed study would attempt to explore how Plath, Ashai and Farrokhzad express existential crisis in their poetry.
- To explore the idea of 'being', search for self, meaning of existence and quest for identity as experienced by gendered body in the poetry of Plath, Ashai and Farrokhzad.
- To examine the key terms and characteristics of existentialism and their redefinitions.
- To explore how these three women poets represent varying emotional, psychological or existential complexities visa-a-vis gender, sexuality and man-woman treatment.
- To delineate the similarities and differences in the experiences of the three female poets across different time periods and different cultures.

Literature Review

There is a huge body of work that constitutes existentialism. However, Simon de Beauvoir is the only female philosopher who contributed to the school of existentialism by highlighting the existential condition of women and therefore deviated from the quintessential, normative, male narratives of existentialism. It can be argued that existentialist feminism as a school of thought mostly draws from Simon de Beauvoir's work *The Second Sex* in which she posits the existentialist belief that women alone could define themselves and in doing so, they could free themselves from the tight clutches of patriarchal domination. Therefore, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* can be considered as a trail blazing work on the existential condition of women. In existentialist feminism, not much work has been done except the pioneering work by de Beauvoir and subsequently the later existential feminists also based their works on the insights of Beauvoir. Therefore, most of the work that has been produced in existentialist feminism has been done in relation to Simon de Beauvoir's work. For example, in the book *Encyclopaedia of Feminist Theories*, Mary Jeane Larrabee and Code Lorraine discuss existentialism in relation to Beauvoir, Merleau ponty and Sartre. The book focuses upon the socially imposed gender roles, and culturally constructed discourses about women and criticize not only sexist limitations of earlier existentialists but also the poststructuralists who deny the individual freedom and subject. Likewise, Margaret Simons in the text *Beauvoir and the Second Sex: Feminism,*

Race and Origins of Existentialism offers a unique perspective on Beauvoir's wide-ranging contribution to the twentieth century existentialist thought and details the discovery of origins of Beauvoir's existential philosophy. In another book *Existentialism, Feminism and Simon de Beauvoir*, Joseph Mahon defends Beauvoir's existentialist feminism against the Sartrean masculinism by offering Beauvoir's account from an existential perspective and the early origins of women's relegation to the category of other. Gwendolyn Dolske in "Existential Deconstruction: de Beauvoir's Fictional portrayal of Woman's Situation" focuses on Beauvoir's reconciliation of Sartrean ontology in conjunction with the situation of women. Also, Hiatt Mary P in "Existentialism and Feminism" discusses how a female writer who chooses her way of life suffers anxiety associated with freedom, isolation and non-conformity and still remains free, which goes in accordance with the tenants of existentialism.

This study therefore, aims to further explore the relationship between existentialism and gender through the work of three women poets namely Sylvia Plath, Shabnam Ashai and Forugh Farrokhzad. Although much research has been carried out on Plath's work, however, Farrokhzad and Ashai remain largely unexplored. The works of these three poets is characterized by an existential consciousness of being and not being that is determined or governed by gender to a large extent. Plath has not been explored much from the existentialist point of view. Most of the research that has been done on Plath has largely covered her art and poetic vision, confessionalism, psychoanalysis, feminism and biography. For example, Jacquiline Rose in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* offers an interpretation of Plath's writing, claiming that earlier interpretations- both feminist and psychoanalytic, have been too polarized. The book discusses how Plath has continued to become an object of intense speculation of fantasy, repulsion and desire. The book also argues that no writer has demonstrated more forcefully the importance of inner psychic life for the wider sexual and political world. Gary Lane in *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry* broadens the perspective on Plath's work by going beyond the images of Plath as a cult figure to discuss Plath as a Poet. In the book, *Sylvia Plat: An Introduction to the Poetry*, Susan Bassnett discusses how Plath's poetry is highly individualistic through which she develops her own private mythology by weaving together themes and images in such subtle ways that are not always immediately obvious to the reader. In another book titled as *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry,* Susan Bassnett uses a feminist and post-

structuralist approach to offer a new study of Plath that rejects the standard myths of Plath as a doomed Poet and deprived woman. In the book *Sylvia Plath's Poetry and Existence*, David Holbrook details the important things about Plath's particular kind of experiences and how she suffered a characteristic sense of existential insecurity in the world. P.J Annas in the essay "The Self in the World: The Social Context of Sylvia Plath's Late Poems" discusses how the dialectical tension between self and world in the later poems of Plath became the location of meaning characterized by a conflict between stasis and movement, isolation and engagement. It also details how Plath's poetry deals with re-birth of self. Charles Newman in *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium* offers a critical analysis to Plath's poetry with a complete bibliography, biographical detail, checklist of criticism and an appendix of uncollected and unpublished work. Some of the other representational works on Sylvia Plath are *Sylvia Plath: Her life and Work* by Eileen Aird, Linda Wagner's *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*, Anne Stevenson's *A life of Sylvia Plath*, Jo Gill's *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* and Butscher Edward's *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness.*

Shabnam Ashai has written five collections of poetry in Urdu. Despite having won national award for her poetry collection, *Akeli* (Alone), her poetry remains largely unexplored. Although, there are few brief essays that have been written about her poetry but none of those undertake a detailed study or a rigorous content analysis of her work. T.S. Chawla refers to Ashai as a very individualistic and philosophical poetess of modern times. He comments that the remarkable clarity of expression and chaste diction of Ashai lends a spectoral kind of smoothness to her existentialist philosophy. (174). He praises her for her substantial contribution to the canon of Urdu poetry. (176) Jitendra Singh, an editor of International Journal "Gandhians in Actions" in an article "Poetess from Kashmir Valley", writes, "under the magical spell of her spiritual panacea, as one proceeds to surmount the painful contradictions of the dominant existentialist philosophy of the twentieth century, one naturally feels inclined to adore her as our ancient 'Shri Vidya' spanning the energy field of TIME and SPACE, with ultimate harmony of LIGHT and SOUND and an ultimate consummation of universal concord (Cosmic Consciousness)" (165). Muneeb-ur-Rahman in his article, "Shabnam's 'Manbaani', a Collection of Poems" highlights that Ashai has not taken the path of the traditional Urdu poet of either sex who writes ghazals with traditional meanings, words and imagery. She is without a doubt one of those new poets

who attempt to completely break away from the traditional mode of expression and represent a saga of woman's being (172).

Forugh Farrokhzad's poetry demonstrates her existential evolution and reflects her dissatisfaction with a predetermined essence based on habits and conventions. Although her poetry is layered with existential themes yet no significant amount of work has been undertaken from the point of view of existentialism. Also, there is a very small amount of material which is available in English on Forough Farrokhzad's work. For example, Michael Craig Hillmann in the book, *In A Lonely Woman: Forugh Farrokhzad and her Poetry*, discusses how Farrokhzad demonstrates a unique tenacity in striving for artistic freedom and individuality. The book provides both the historical context of the life of Farrokhzad to build an appreciation of the poet in particular and modern Persian poetry in general. S Kasam in *Individualism and Social Conformity in the Poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad* focuses on the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, and its impact on the life of one woman who in her restless search for an authentic self becomes representative of Iranian women and the nation as a whole. In the book, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, F Milani highlights how Iranian Poet Farrokhzad marked an evolution in her literary growth and self-expression and, also illustrates how in Iran, the nineteenth century movement to unveil was closely linked to women's emergence as literary figures.

Tentative Questions:

- How does the work of Plath, Ashai and Farrokhzad challenge or problematize the patriarchal version of existentialism?
- In what ways do the existential philosophy of the three women poets critique the dominant female essentialism?
- Is alienation, abandonment and angst, the key characteristics of existentialism, as experienced by women problematized or complicated by their gender?
- What are the similarities and contrasts in Plath's, Ashai's and Farokhzad's existentialism? Also, how do the three women poets experience existentialism differently while having lived across different time frames and different cultures?

- How does man-woman relationship mark the experience of existentialism in the select texts.

Research Methodology

The methodology to be adopted in the proposed study will be qualitative in nature. It would be an exploratory study and would employ textual analysis. The primary data of the research includes Sylvia Plath's *The Ariel*, *The Collosus*, and the *Collected Poems*, Forugh Farrokhzad's *Sin*, translated by Sholeh Wolpe and Shabnam Ashai's *The Nosegay of Nazms*, translated by Mushtaque Barq. The primary method of the proposed study would be exegetical method that includes interpretation and analysis of the texts. The study will undertake a close reading of the primary and select secondary texts within the broader theoretical framework of existentialist feminism to establish Plath, Ashai and Farrokhzad as existential feminist poets. The key proponents of existentialist feminism for the current study would be Simon de Beauvoir, Mary Jeanne Larrabee, Lorraine Code, Mary P Hiatt, Margaret Simons and Joseph Mahon. The theories and concepts of Existential feminism will be employed in examining and understanding the objectives and questions proposed in the current study.

Through textual analysis, the study would find the points of contact between essentialism and existentialism in relation to women's experiences of being. Also, the research would critically engage with the ideas of self and other, essence and existence, freedom and responsibility, hope and despair, meaning and nothingness as experienced by the three women poets.

Tentative Chapterisation

Introduction

1. Existentialist Feminism: An Introduction
2. Existential Crisis and Gender: An Examination of Sylvia Plath's Poetry
3. Existentialism and Sexuality: A Critical Study of Forugh Farrokhzad's Poetry
4. Existential Crisis and Treatment of Man-Woman Relationship in the Poetry of Shabnam Ashai
5. Similarities and Differences in the Experiences of Existential Crisis in the Poetry of Plath, Ashai and Farrokhzad

Conclusion

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